

Tales From the Inside: Ten Days in Jewish Ukraine

Shabbat Shalom. Picture, if you will, a complex of seven conjoined office buildings, arranged like the candles of a Menorah. Scattered and nestled among the space in the buildings are office space, a hotel, a hostel, a kosher restaurant, kosher supermarket, a cafe, a mikveh, a large Holocaust museum, and a restored Orthodox synagogue. On top of the highest tower is an observation deck and a conference room, and the whole complex is Shomer Shabbat. When I first visited this incredible place, I dubbed it, jokingly, “Judaism Incorporated”, and in many ways it is the headquarters of Judaism in Eastern Europe. It’s real name is the Menorah Center, although everyone in the city calls it, simply, “Menorah”. However, the buildings are not completely utilized; several floors are empty, the gift shops selling all sorts of art and Judaica don’t seem to do a great deal of business, and apart from the shul, the buildings themselves don’t feel “lived in”. There’s great hope and also a tinge of sadness here, but I’ll speak about that in a bit.

So how did I end up here? How did I end up in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, in February, in the midst of the greatest political upheaval this country has seen since the Second World War? My friend and colleague Emilia Diamant is the director of programming at Prozdor at Hebrew College and is in charge of their Havayah program. (You may be familiar with Emilia’s mother Anita, author of the bestseller “The Red Tent”, among other works.) Emilia and I met initially when I joined the Prozdor faculty, and our professional and personal friendship has blossomed since then. When she pitched the idea in December of co-leading the Havayah program in Ukraine with her, I became excited immediately. The program was to take place over February vacation (which I’m still getting used to, having never had a February vacation going to school in Maryland), and the program itself is a great example of the power of Jewish education, as well as the importance of getting teens involved with yiddishkeit.

Havayah (Hebrew for “experience”) brings together Jewish teens from Boston and Haifa to help teach classes and do their own original programming with younger students at the Jewish day school in Dnepropetrovsk, amongst other activities. Ukraine’s fourth-largest city and a center of Jewish life for a very long time, Dnepropetrovsk (or “Dnep” as some call it) is considered a “Jewish city”. There is a growing and active Jewish population there, and the mayor is Jewish. An important part of its Jewish heritage lies in the fact that Dnep is the hometown of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. As such, the Menorah Center is owned and maintained by Chabad-Lubavitch, and one of his *schluchim*, or emissaries, administers the complex.

The fighting began on our second day in Ukraine. At first there were just rumors, but as the day went on I was able to get online and see the headlines. I was startled when I went to one reputable news source’s website and read the stark headline, which was two simple words: “KIEV BLEEDS”. Mobs of protesters had gathered at Independence Square in Kiev, and were demanding the immediate resignation of president Viktor Yanukovich, a lackey of Vladimir Putin who had reneged on his deal to sign Ukraine into the European Union. The protests became violent from the start; molotov cocktails were being thrown by the mob at the government riot police, and the police were beating back the protesters and trying to drive them out of the square. There were reports of a couple serious injuries, and then some deaths. The violence was heightened by the presence of *titushki*- roving bands of young men who are essentially “guns for hire”. For the right price, they will disrupt and physically harm groups of protesters, and it was clear that pro-Russian *titushki* had had a hand in the violent events.

I immediately utilized my social media to put out the word that we were okay. I assured everyone on Facebook that Dnepropetrovsk lies roughly 300 kilometers to the east of Kiev, and the unrest hadn’t yet spread beyond that city. Moreover, we had round-the-clock security guards

with us and were not venturing to any questionable areas of the city. Most emphatically, I mentioned in my postings that the unrest in the country has nothing to do with anti-Semitism; this was Ukrainians struggling against a corrupt government that had failed to represent their values. However, the media were not helping to spread good news. The New York Times, the BBC, CNN Europe, and other news sources were sensationalizing their news coverage with stories of beatings, and I knew that our family and friends back home would be worried. Throughout our ten days in Ukraine, Emilia and I were in constant contact with CJP, the state department, the American embassy and other entities in order to keep our group safe and obtain reliable news.

While we ourselves were never in danger, the spectre of violence was with us throughout our ten days in the country. While there were no instances of violence or unrest in Dnepropetrovsk during that time, there was one instance of fear that we experienced. After lunch one day at the Jewish day school, around 2 PM, a group of parents arrived at the school in what appeared to be an agitated state. Before I knew what was happening, there were grim rumors. Was a mob coming towards the school to harass the students and teachers? Was there a riot in the middle of the city? After a few minutes of worry, watching parents leave the school hurriedly with their children before the school day was over, we found out the truth. The Dnepropetrovsk soccer team, whose stadium is adjacent to the school, was playing an international friendly that night, and the parents wanted to bring their children home before the majority of fans arrived for the game. Unfortunately, there has been a history of vandalism and violence associated with the Dnepropetrovsk soccer hooligans, and although it hasn't been expressly anti-Semitic, the parents knew that it was wise to bring their children home early before the stadium got crowded.

In spite of the tense political situation, we got to take part in some wonderful experiences outside of the day school. We visited the Bayit Hannah school for children with special needs, and we played and learned with boys and girls who did not have access to a normal education

due to persistent social stigmas. We visited a Jewish home for the elderly, and very much enjoyed schmoozing with the kind men and women who gave up some of their day to spend time with us. When one elderly woman in her late 80's sang a beautiful rendition of *My Yiddishe Mama* for us while another accompanied her on the piano, there was not a dry eye in the room. We spent a wonderful Shabbat at the Golden Rose Synagogue, a restored historic shul that is now part of the Menorah complex. The rabbi, Rav Chaim Kaminetzki, made time to visit and chat with us after Shabbat in his gleaming conference room atop the Menorah. His humor and insight made us all feel at ease during an uncomfortable time. As an educator, each of these experiences made me feel extreme pride in my work, and watching American, Israeli and Ukrainian students form such friendships that they cried when we left each other at the airport was incredible.

I was asked towards the end of our trip to write a blog post to sum up some of our experiences. I asked myself and my readers certain questions in an attempt to synthesize and make sense of our Ukraine experience:

What will happen when our students return to school this week? How will they sit in history class without pondering all that we've experienced, felt and seen? Will they continue to form the same strong friendships that were forged during our time in Dnepropetrovsk in such short order, despite differences in language and customs?

What sort of teacher will I myself be when I return to school? How do I go back to teaching Spanish literature after such a powerful, visceral Jewish experience? In my advanced class on Hispanic dictatorships, how can I fully convey to my students all that I've taken in this week, witnessing the birth of a new era for Ukraine?

How will we, as young American Jews, continue to support and connect with Jews in Ukraine and elsewhere who have firsthand experience with anti-Semitism? After spending time

in “the Old Country”, from which many of our families were eager to flee, will we choose to return? How will we view Judaism outside of the American/Israeli lens?

How will those Jews who remember Babi Yar and mass killings live out the remainder of their days? Will they be proud of their Judaism and display it openly, or keep some part of it hidden?

And what will become of Ukraine itself?

In the months since our trip, I’ve been able to answer a couple of these questions. Based on what I’ve seen on Facebook, it’s clear that the connections students formed are not temporary. Well wishes for birthdays are sent, photos are shared, and Havayah participants are actively following the news in Ukraine. As a Jew whose great grandparents came over from Odessa, it was a great feeling to travel back to Ukraine and catch a glimpse of what’s become of their former home. However, my optimism has also been tempered by sadness- a mass grave of Shoah victims in the east has been vandalized. Anti-semitism, while not part of Ukraine’s initial unrest, is still very real and is still part of the national conversation. The geographical, philosophical and linguistic divides in Ukraine are quite pronounced, and there are pros and cons to both joining and not joining the European Union. Without making too broad an inference, it’s my belief that the country cannot exist as it has. Long term, there is a very real possibility of an East Ukraine alongside a West Ukraine. Whether or not this will benefit Ukraine’s people is anyone’s guess, but the situation on the ground is untenable- the violence of the last few days is evidence of this. Dnepropetrovsk lies close to Donetsk, Luhansk, Slovyansk, and other cities whose names we’ve heard in the news recently (none of it good).

Which brings us back to the Menorah Center. It serves as evidence of the strength of Dnepropetrovsk’s Jewish community and is one of the most recognizable landmarks in the city. The gleaming hallways, myriad of services and beautiful amenities are built for a dynamic Jewish

community. But I wonder about the empty space: the unused rooms, the partially-completed activity center, the seldom-used grand ballroom. Clearly, the complex is built for what one *hopes* will become of Jewish Ukraine, and not the community in its current state. “*Im tirtzu, en lo agada*”- “If you will it, it is no dream”. The dream has clearly been dreamt; whether or not it will be realized remains to be seen.

Our parshah, Matot, is full of war: generals, soldiers, shock troops and invasions. I need not mention that the parallels to the current situations in Ukraine and Israel are obvious. I can only hope that peace breaks out in both countries, that *k'lal Yisrael* remains safe, and that bloodshed is minimal. We are taught, “כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה”- “All of Israel are guarantors for one another.” We can fulfill this charge by supporting fellow Jews wherever they are. By supporting the work of the Boston-Haifa connection; by helping to ensure that Jews need never fear for ourselves because of who we are; by practicing peace in our own communities; by taking care of our elderly, many of whom have seen the best and worst of humanity; by educating our youth in the history of where we come from; and by striving to always be better. Havayah does all of these, and working with such an organization has been one of the highlights of my career as a Jewish educator. Shabbat Shalom.